Connection

The monocled cat stared back at Derrick with a shit-eating grin. Below the cartoonish purple face, a jewel-bordered font spanned across the card:
"*25 MILLION Fat Cat Takes All: Scratch Three Cats and WIN JACKPOT*."

Derrick blew the silver dust from the card and recounted the three exposed Cheshire clones lined up across the scratch grid.

Sweet Jesus.

He cocked an eyebrow, then raised his gaze to the attendant at the counter. She was pawing a pack of Marlboros over to a ratty-looking man who desperately fumbled a wad of ones between sickly, yellowed fingers. Neither of them paid Derrick any mind.

He turned a careful glance over his shoulder, clocked the only other patron of SPEED'N'GO — a young kid slumped off in a half-nod by the soda fountain — then quietly slipped the scratch-off card into the front pocket of his sweatshirt. His temples were hot and something tickled at his greying hairline. He resisted the urge to mop his brow and instead maintained the stone face he wore on every morning's breakfast pickup.

Twenty-five million. Ain't no way. It's a joke — one of them viral pranks the kids been doing. Yeah, that's it. Somebody went and messed with all the cards. Bet they're all like this. Ain't nothin' to go be gettin' all excited about, just a prank.

He turned and stepped back into line behind the ratty man.

Still…

"For'et somethin'?" The attendant croaked.

"Yeah," Derrick said through a throat full of gravel. "Grizzly long cut. Wintergreen."

He waited for the sweaty woman in the faded pink uniform to turn her back and fold herself over like a wet wad of bubblegum before he added "-and another scratch. Fat Cat."

"Uh-huh," she grunted, then returned to the counter with a huff. She slapped the card onto the tobacco tin and thrust the items toward Derrick.

"Sixty-two-oh-eight."

He reached into his pocket, paused, produced a weathered MasterCard, then tapped the POS terminal. Sale complete. The woman wagged a receipt. Derrick waved it away and an acrid sting of body odor struck his nose, but to this, he paid no mind. Instead, thoughts of Cheshire cats and mountains of cash occupied that space in his head.

Just a prank, he thought. *Just a prank, brother. Don't let 'em shake you up.*

He grabbed the tin and scratch-off as calmly as he could, jammed them into the back pocket of his paint-stained Levi's, and hurried out the door.

The truck engine had hardly started its desperate wheezing when Derrick pulled the card — the second one — from the pocket of his pants. He plucked a sticky coin from the oversized cupholder next to his thigh and went to work on the silver face:

SEVEN. CAT. NINETEEN.
Next.
THREE. FIFTEEN. FOURTEEN.
No.
ELEVEN. CAT. NINE.
Well, I'll be-

The card was worthless. His heart skipped. So, it wasn't a prank after all. Derrick flipped the loser's scratch-off over and read the back, slowly and strained; reading had never been a strong point for Derrick, but still, he read it carefully enough. He squinted:

CLAIMING INSTRUCTIONS: Rewards of LESS THAN One Thousand ($1,000) Dollars may be redeemed at your local retailer, see...

No, no. His eyes skimmed through the wall of text- Bam, there it was:

Rewards GREATER THAN One Million ($1,000,000) Dollars must be claimed IN-PERSON at the U.S. Lottery and Games Bureau:

555 Durham Lane,
Richmond, Virginia
Monday-Thursday, 9am-12pm.

So that was it. That's where he would go.

Twenty-Five Million dollars.

He had to remember to breathe now. Something had ballooned in his throat. His eyes navigated the rest of the painfully small print, and as he read, his right hand, mindless in its movement and seemingly on its own, drifted over the pocket in his sweatshirt: the pocket which held the real scratch-off card, the winner's card.

Twenty-Five Million dollars.

Monday morning.

Alright then. He'd have to wait. He'd have to wait a whole forty-eight hours, but he could do that, though, he thought. Keep tight-lipped for forty-eight long ones? Yeah, he could do that.

Twenty-Five Million dollars. Shit.

There would be taxes, of course. There were always taxes, and how much would those be? With the way things had been going, the government would probably take damn-near half. Then there was the chunk he would have to give to Ma. That was fine, he didn't mind. Ma could use the cash. The old man wouldn't be seeing a dime, though. And what about Dee? He'd have to tell her, wouldn't he? How much of the cut would she want?

Derrick scowled. *Call it ten to keep*.

Ten Million dollars.

Derrick rolled down the truck window and spit a glob of thick, brown phlegm onto the pavement. It stuck where it landed. His eyes scanned the parking lot and settled on a black Mercedes-Benz parked caddy-corner to the store, still running and spaced safely away from any folk who might mar its mirrored coat with an errant door. The headlights of the Benz cut off. The driver stepped out. Derrick squinted.

The owner of the car was a coffee-colored boy, perhaps no older than twenty-six, with a mop of curly black hair and a single long earring. His boots were clean. His sports jacket was crisp. Derrick scowled at the thought that the boy had taken the time to press a single careful crease down the center of each of his pant legs — the type of crease which had been purposely maintained and meticulously ironed into place by someone who cared oh so dearly about their appearance, lest he appear *low*. The boy crossed the lot and skipped up onto the sidewalk. Derrick's eyes followed him through the rear-view mirror as he strolled past the bed of the aging 2028 Dodge Ram.

Then the boy stopped. He lifted a hand to his neck, pressed into a spot just below his right ear, nodded to no one Derrick could see, then opened the door to the old SPEED'N'GO with the carelessness of one under the protection of an invisible and all-seeing eye.

Little far from home, ain't you?

Derrick spit again. Types like these were a more common sight each day, it seemed. He didn't enjoy the judgment, but he couldn't help it. Danville used to be a nice little town: the type of town where everyone knew everyone, and outsiders did well to pass on through, minding their manners while they were at it. That was the Danville that Derrick had known. Now the town hardly seemed recognizable to him these days.

Maybe it was time to leave.

Maybe.

Ten Million Dollars.

"Tell you what." He grumbled to himself as he threw the tobacco-stained gear shift of the rumbling pickup into "D" and dropped the steel toe of his boot to the dusty truck floor. The Ram thundered out of its parking spot.

“Ain’t no money, millions or not, gonna have me puttin’ that shit in my head.” The truck rounded the gas station pumps, then roared out of the SPEED’N’GO lot.

“Ain’t no money.” Derrick Williams said again as he raced down the road to join the collective of morning commuters flowing neatly, orderly, and as one, down Danville, Virginia’s Business Route 58.

2

The U.S. Lottery and Games building stood six stories tall and cast a wide shadow across the full asphalt lot. Derrick parked as close to the front of the black-glassed behemoth as possible (which wasn't very close at all) and settled the oversized pickup truck into its resting place. He exhaled, took a swig of his now-warm Pepsi, and swiveled the rear-view mirror towards himself to confirm the stranger in its reflection. He was disgusted by what he saw.

"*I heard they take yer picture.*" James had said. "*Saw a video uh it on Inter-Tube once. Yeah, they take yer picture then they post it all up on the news and er'ywhere else. If I e'er won the lottery, I tell you what, I'd go up there lookin' like somebody else. Put some glasses on and cut my hair, real stupid-like so they don't e'er recognize ya. Hell, I'd go lookin' like a woman if it meant no one'd know it was me. Yup, that picture gonna end all up on the internet- prolly in the papers too I bet ya.*"

Ol' James had never meant much by it, but it had been good advice nonetheless, and possibly the smartest thing to ever come out of the fat man's mouth. Thank the Lord for the Wednesday nights the four of them had spent holed up in Tully's Tavern. Thank'ya James.

Now, Derrick's hair was gone. The ponytail had been the first to go — hacked into a ridiculous banged mess of a mop cut. God, it looked fucking stupid. He had chopped his hair up in the bathroom before Dee had woken, but he had stopped short of cutting off his beard, figuring that waiting to shave until after his visit to The Games Building would be a smarter move to help him hide from the all-seeing public eye. He had dyed his formerly grey beard and sandy hair jet black. Derrick grumbled. He realized now that he had left the dye up on the bathroom counter. That didn't matter much; Dee probably wouldn't even think twice about it.

He wore a pair of thick-rimmed reading glasses — had picked them up at the Five and Dime on the way — and had even gone as far as to miserably apply a thick layer of his wife's eyeliner around his eyes. A younger Derrick would have spit at the thought of doing such a thing.

But a man would do a lot for millions, and if this was what it would take to avoid coming home to a mob of pity-seeking neighbors and sob-storied relatives, then so be it. A lot of things were going to be different now.

He swatted the rear-view mirror out of his face, cursed, and crumpled up the image of what he had just seen, and tried his hardest to toss it into the wastebasket which resided in the farthest corner of his mind. The crumpled image skimmed the rim and landed on a dusty floor beside it.

Whatever. Fuck it. The disguise would have to be good enough.

He cut the engine and patted the front pocket of his new overcoat. His ticket to millions was still there — had been every time he had checked this trip. Good.

Derrick opened the truck door and stepped down into the shadow of The Games Building.

"Name?"

"Derrick Williams."

"Alright, and what can I do for you, Mr. Williams?"

"I'm here to redeem a- a scratch-off."

"Great. May I see your card and your ID, please?"

The clerk eyed the strange make-upped man before her and extended her hand over the glossed black countertop. He did not react. Instead, he returned only a statue's glare.

"You know," Derrick said, tapping the counter between them twice with his fingertips, "I think I, uh, want security present before I go givin' you anything."

She nodded.

“Understood, sir.”

It didn’t take long for the suited men to arrive. Upon receiving Derrick’s request for security, the clerk’s eyes had glazed over and darted across a menu which Derrick could not see. She nodded her head. An obsidian door at the far end of the glossy lobby slid open. Two broad-shouldered men emerged.

“*Mr. Williams here has come to redeem a winning ticket and has requested you gentlemen to be present while he does so. Isn’t that wonderful?”,* Derrick had expected the Barbie-dolled clerk to chime, but alas, she had made no such statements. There was no need for such frivolous vocalizations these days. Not with folks like these. In the old days, they had spoken their thoughts out loud to each other, but not these days, no. The suits joined the pair swiftly and without a word.

“Now, Mr. Williams, if you are quite satisfied, may I see your ticket?”

Derrick reached into his pocket and produced the thing he had coveted so dearly for the last forty-eight hours. He handed it to the woman behind the counter.
25 MILLION Fat Cat Takes All.

The parking lot of the US Games building was mostly empty now, and the shadow that had been cast over it had been swallowed by the greater shadow of night. Derrick’s legs were rubber. His mind was swamp mush. Countless words from state lawyers, games representatives, tax professionals, investment opportunists, and other suit-clad, chip-brained drones buzzed about through his mind like a mad swarm of insects in the desperate throes of late summer.

Annuities, liabilities, validations, *securities, wealth management strategies, shoveitupyourassandgivememycheck-ituities*. What Derrick had thought would be a quick one-two, card in, cash out, confirmation had, in turn, been a day fraught with explanations and legal jargon from every which corner of the law, told through countless clean-shaven, straight-toothed, probably-lying mouths.

Yes, sir. No, sir. That's right, sir. Not quite, sir. Sign here, sir. And here, sir. Fantastic, sir. Hang tight, my assistant will be with you shortly, sir.

But it was done now. The conversations were over, and he had settled out. In the end, he had waived the full amount of the lottery cash prize in favor of a lump-sum payout. Tomorrow was never guaranteed, and a dispersed payment was for chumps. After tax and penalties, the amount had come out to roughly eleven-point-eight million dollars. *Sign on the dotted line and you're all set, Mr. Williams.*

Eleven million dollars.

But the man — the ninth, or maybe it had been the tenth person Derrick had spoken to that evening — had told him to expect the funds to be delivered in six to eight weeks, and damn it if it wasn't going to be the longest six to eight weeks of Derrick's life.

Six to eight weeks.

He started across the lot, reached into his back pocket, pulled out a half-empty tin of wintergreen, and was banging the tin against the heel of his palm when he noticed the figure heading towards him.

Click click click.

Heels on pavement.

He squinted.

The woman's long black coat and dark hair fluttered behind her like a shadow that had come to life, enveloped her, and hid her amongst the monochrome blacks and greys of the silent vehicles still parked in the Games building lot. For this reason, she had made it startlingly close before he had taken notice of her. She moved fixed and steadily. She did not look at Derrick.

Then she was upon him — and would've collided with him, perhaps would've driven the heel of her stiletto straight through the top of Derrick's foot, had he not stepped out of her way at the very last moment. She did not flinch nor take so much as a pause as she passed by the unusual, ragged-looking man with the black beard and the horribly applied makeup.

In all likelihood, and despite Derrick having been directly in the woman's path, she probably had never even seen him at all. Such things were possible these days for those who could afford them, and whether he had been categorized as homeless, crazy, or both, the end result was all the same for Derrick, who, through the wonders of modern technology, had been made almost entirely invisible to the woman.

Derrick turned and gave the passerby a scowl as she trotted up the steps of The Games building and melted into its blackness.

He returned to his truck with a freshly packed lip of tobacco. It wouldn't be long before he would forget about the woman and her indifference to him. After all, she was just another one of the *connected*, and the memory of her was quickly replaced by the buzzing hum of conversations from earlier that day.

A payment was coming. He had settled out. The men in the suits had given Derrick the lowdown, and a life-changing amount of money would be deposited into his own personal bank account. What's done was done.

In the end, they had taken his picture and let him know that it would be published in the local paper, though his name would be omitted as he had requested.

Whatever. Fuck it.

Eleven million dollars.

3

Derrick knew the question would be asked before he had even stepped through the doorway.

“Did you see my text?” a throaty voice called from the den of the single-story ranch.

“Nope. Must’ve missed it,” Derrick called back.

All things considered, this was a rather inconsequential lie to tell his wife of twenty-three years.

A hefty yellow Labrador waddled through the doorway to greet Derrick. He scratched the old dog’s head and passed through to the kitchen. Beyond, and down a single depressed step, the ragged back of a corduroy couch concealed the bulk of his wife, who was only visible by a frizzled plume of black and gold hair, freshly permed and colored, peeking above a lumpy sofa cushion. She did not turn around. Her attention was fixed on a wide screen on the far wall where a man, presumably a news anchor by some bastardization of the definition, was screaming about today’s latest outrage.

“So you didn’t pick up any ice cream from the store?”

“Afraid not, hun,” Derrick replied.

There was a rustling on the couch, and for a moment, Derrick thought she might pull herself up, drag herself over into the kitchen, stop, and ask her husband what the hell was on his face and why he had chopped the long hair he had kept for as long as she had known him.

This did not happen. The plume of hair sank below the cushions. There was no further discussion.

Derrick grabbed a beer from the fridge and crossed the kitchen to the door of the garage. His boots fell heavy on the linoleum. He did not glance back to the den; he had other things to worry about.

Eleven million dollars.

4

The universe had a funny way of playing its tricks, Derrick figured, because it hadn't been but two and a half weeks since his journey to the US Lottery and Games Building when the jobsite lunch talk had turned to the topic of a recent, unknown lottery winner.

Up until that point, the day had proceeded much like any other: Derrick had continued to clock into his shifts on the construction site, partially to avoid arousing any suspicion of his new situation, and partially because he knew better than to spend money he did not yet have — that lesson had been hard-wired into him by his Pop — not through any careful teaching, mind you, but through the troubled childhood that comes with being the dependent of a drunk with a particularly nasty addiction to backroom poker.

Mostly, though, Derrick had continued his job as a craftsman because he had made himself a quiet promise that he would never let any amount of money change who he was or where he came from. And so, it was this promise that had led him to the same old defaced picnic table where he had been finding himself every 11:05am on every workday of the week for the past thirteen months of the job.

"Y'all hear someone just won the lottery?" a large-bellied man asked as he lumbered up to the group.

The man dropped his tray to the table and swung a hammy leg over its wooden bench, across from where Derrick sat. His name was Rusty, and he would be dead in a few years from a sudden heart attack, though Derrick had no way of knowing this.

"Uh-uh," chirped a thin, wiry-looking fella who sat hunched over his meal next to Derrick.

Derrick spread a paper towel before him, patted it flat, then pulled a loaf of Eastgrain whole wheat bread from his lunch cooler. He laid out four perfectly square slices of bread onto the paper.

"Well, they did. Twenty-Five Million dollars, can you believe it?" Rusty said.

“Bullshit,” said a bald man through a mouthful of mashed potatoes. “Couldn’t have. I see the Powerball ticker up on the Route 30 billboard every day when I’m on in to work, up off Westgrove. It hasn’t rolled over yet, and it’s well o’er twenty-five million. Hundred somethin’, I think.”

“No, it ain’t a Powerball,” Rusty said. “Someone went and won big on one of them scratch-offs.”

“No shit,” said the thin fella. “Maybe I’ll buy one after work today.”

The bald man coughed. “You stupid? You don’t go buyin’ the lottery right after someone just won,” he said. “Shit, you’re dumb as you look, ain’t you?”

A chuckle spread across the table. Derrick didn’t look up from his lunch. He carefully laid out two slices of bologna on exactly two of the four slices of bread in front of him, just as he did every lunch.

“No, no, let the kid talk. I wanna hear it,” Rusty said, raising a thick, stubby hand. “Charlie, tell us, just what would you go and do if you won twenty-five million dollars?”

Charlie looked down at the table for a moment, scratched at his pock-marked cheek with a grubby finger, then looked back up at Rusty. His reply came out in a squeak.

“I’d get a bunch of hookers.”

The table roared with laughter. Derrick cracked a smile, but did not look up. He crossed each of the two meatless slices of bread with a careful crosshatch of condiments: three horizontal lines of red pepper sauce, followed by two vertical lines of yellow mustard. That was how he always did it. That was how his mother had always done it.

“Cute, but no, I tell you what you gotta do,” Rusty started, pointing a finger at Charlie, “I’ll give you some good advice so listen up, alright? You gotta invest it all, that’s what you gotta do. You don’t even think about it. That’s what the rich folk do. You get a hedge fund manager and put it all in index funds and they take care of everything. Then, you take out loans, and use the interest off the investments to pay off the interest on the loans, see? That’s what the real rich folk do, that’s how you use the money real smart like and then you can write off all the taxes so the government doesn’t get to take a penny of it from you.”

There was a quiet bob of heads across the table. Rusty took a proud bite of his pork sandwich. Derrick took one prepared slice of bread and neatly laid it on top of its counterpart, carefully lining up the crusted edges. Then he assembled the second.

The bald man, Kevin, spoke up.

“Hey, I got a question for y’all. Suppose you did win the lottery, right, say you have twenty-five million dollars just sittin’ in your bank account. You think you’d go get the chip?”

“Hell no,” said Rusty.

“Nah,” said Charlie in agreement.

“Y’all full of shit,” piped up a fourth man who had been listening in on the conversation from across the table. “How you going to say you wouldn’t? Everybody who can afford one’s got one.”

“Yeah, that don’t mean I want to be like everybody else,” Rusty said.

“Bullshit,” The newcomer cut him off. “You probably would’ve said you’d never get internet either if you was around when that came out, but I see you using that damned phone all the time. Shit, I seen you was on it when you was supposed to be runnin’ firewatch yesterday, get outta here with that.”

“Boy, you better watch yourself, I wasn’t nowhere near my phone yesterday.” Rusty shouted, spraying bits of pulled pork across the table. “And besides, you saying you’d get chipped? You’d sell out to be like all the other rich folk so easy soon as you saw some cash?”

“Damn straight I would, but it wouldn’t be sellin’ out nothing. You know how much you could do with the whole damned internet in your head? All your thoughts just linked up to everybody else’s? Videos streamed straight to your brain, snappin’ pictures with just your eyes with no one knowin-“

“Ay, I bet Charlie would like that.”

The table burst into laughter again. Derrick tied a thin green twist wire around the top of his loaf of Eastgrain and returned it to his lunch box. He glanced at Rusty. Rusty wasn’t laughing with the others.

“All I’m sayin’,” Rusty went on, “is that I don’t ever wanna be connected to a bunch of rich assholes. All that does is turn your brain into theirs and their brains into yours, and then you’re all the same, and I ain’t one of them. Never will be. I’m gon’ be Rusty ‘til the day I die, nobody else, and that’s that.”

Derrick took a slow bite out of his first bologna sandwich and nodded.

“Amen,” He said.

5

It had been six weeks (forty-five and a half days, to be exact) since the man in the suit — the one with the squirrelly eyes and the fragile-looking nose — had told Derrick that he could expect his payout in six to eight weeks. Now, the real test had begun.

Like clockwork on the hour, and with each hour of each day, for the last three days, a lifting, fluttering feeling had waxed and waned in his chest. It was a fluttering that, despite his best attempts, Derrick could not stifle with either a smoke or a dip, nor a cold beer or a fat burger. And so, though he told himself that he was a patient man and that there was little which could ever shake him, he had ultimately fallen to the nervous, compulsive grip which had come with the flutters. This hour was no different.

Derrick pulled up to the front of the ranch home he shared with Dee. The flutters had returned on his drive. He plucked his phone from the dash, entered his bank login information, and glared expectantly at the text on the screen. It read, bold and true:

Checking Account Balance: $796.53
Savings Account Balance: $1,919.23

Sometimes the numbers changed, but never by much, and certainly not by the amount he hoped for. He spit and swore and thrust his phone into the front pocket of his jeans, telling himself that he wouldn't look again until tomorrow — or maybe, at least, not until dinnertime.

These promises, of course, were almost never kept.

--

That weekend, he had decided to go for an afternoon walk — something not completely unusual for Derrick, though his decision to drive into downtown and saunter along Danville's main street *was* a fair departure from his normal behavior. For the most part, the downtown scene was incompatible with Derrick, and he with it, and the division between the two had only grown since as far as he could remember. How long had it been since he had been to Tully's Tavern? Eight, nine years?

Tully's was gone now, and Derrick only had to glance through the eight-foot fishbowl windows to see that what had once been a working man's reprieve had been stripped down, sanitized, and satin-coated in faux-leather furniture, brass fixtures, and farmhouse furnishings, vomited straight from the pages of this month's edition of Modern Millennial. Inside, a gleeful-looking threesome sipped on a motley of disgustingly brightly colored cocktails. Derrick spat. Tully would be rolling in his grave.

Of course, The Cave was gone too. So was Rick's. The lot of the former had been turned into a shitty restaurant, and the latter had been bulldozed — wiped clean from the earth and replaced with a twelve-story monstrosity.

Derrick passed underneath a New York-Gramercy-style overhead:

The Vision: Luxury Apartments for Refined Living

As he passed, an automatic glass door slid open. A waft of cheap perfume assaulted his nostrils from the lobby. He shuffled along. The high-rise rolled on past his peripheral.

Used to be a nice place, he thought.

As for its size, Danville was much larger than it had once been, and Derrick had continued well past what he had remembered as the last block before the city had once given way to the wetlands — there had been good fishing down in those wetlands — but those were gone too, you know.

The creeks and marshland had been filled in with concrete and asphalt by a consortium of hungry developers and replaced with two new strip malls, a convenient store/gas station combo which made SPEED'N'GO look like a halfway house, a rent-to-own carshare lot, more luxury apartments, and a Universe U-Recharge station (now with a

coffee-shop and Cado boutique outlet to peruse while u-charge, isn't that just wonderful?).

Derrick had seen enough. He paused in front of the battery station, spit a glob onto the sidewalk, and began to double back when his phone rang.

Unknown Caller.

He answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Mr. Williams?"

"Not sure. Who's callin'?"

"My name's Clifford Granger, of Granger Financial, pleased to meet you, Mr. Williams."

"Uh-huh."

"I understand you're expecting a deposit? Perhaps something from the U.S. Lottery and Games Bureau?"

Derrick stopped.

"Could be." He said. "You got a check for me?"

The man on the other end chuckled.

"Ah, I'm afraid not, Mr. Williams, but-"

"Well, that's too bad, ain't it?"

Derrick lowered the phone and hovered his thumb over a bright red button. The voice on the other end had continued to speak. Curiosity gripped its fingers around Derrick's wrist and stopped him still. He quietly returned the phone to his ear.

"...twenty-million. I can guarantee you twenty million, Mr. Williams."

"Excuse me?"

"I said I can guarantee you a return of twenty million dollars. The potential, of course, is much greater, but any gains beyond twenty, I cannot guarantee, though it could be as high as forty, maybe even sixty million- a substantial increase from the eleven-point-eight you're expecting."

Derrick held. He gave a glance back over his shoulder, then up the street. He did not respond.

The voice on the phone continued.

“Mr. Williams, I have no doubt that this sounds too good to be true, so please allow me to explain. But that, of course, would require a conversation. Tell you what: if I can keep you on the line just until you make your way back to the Dodge Ram you have parked on Sycamore Street, then I would simply like to propose a partnership. I know you’re still there, so I’ll ask: Would it be too much to just have your ear for three minutes?”

Derrick narrowed his eyes at the rows of empty cars lining the streets. It hadn’t occurred to him that he was being watched, but that had merely been stupidity on his part. These days, you were *always* being watched- Fat Cat scratch winner or not. That was the beauty of collective data gathering. Surely, anyone who had ever bothered to read their U-Link terms of service could tell you that.

“Three minutes,” Derrick said. “But I want you to know that I think you’re full of shit.”

“Great,” The voice said. “What I’m asking is very simple, Mr. Williams. I’m an investor acquisition executive for a large private equity company. You see, I handpick high-net-worth individuals such as yourself and invite them to invest in some of our budding capital projects. I’m sure that the return that I promised to you sounds hard to believe, so I will cut to the chase-

“Hurry up.”

“-Yes, well, if there is one thing that I can get you to understand from this call, Mr. Williams, it’s that whether you like it or not, you’re about to join a very different class of folk very soon. For people like you and I, investment returns of two-hundred, three-hundred, heck, even five-hundred percent are not unheard of, nor are they unexpected. Now, I would hate to see you make a poor decision with your newfound wealth, especially when I think we can both mutually benefit from a partnership. Do you understand?”

“Sure.”

“The trouble for you, though, is that there’s surely to be conmen, vultures if you will, frothing at the mouth to rip that sweet lottery money out of your hands. But you’re a smart man, so surely you understand this. That’s why it’s important for you to partner up early on with someone reputable and established in the industry. Do you see? *I’m* not out to scam you, but others are, and if you have your doubts, then please, I implore you to research Granger Financial and draw your own conclusions before we speak again.”

“That’s great. I’m almost to my truck. Are you finished?”

“Just one last thing, Mr. Williams. If you would like to partner with us for a guaranteed return of no less than twenty million dollars, then I will advise you that speaking on the phone like this is outdated and a major security risk. So, once you have received your check from the Games and Lottery Bureau — which my information tells me you should have by end of business next Thursday — then I would like to meet with you in person so we can discuss how you can become more *connected* with us. How does that sound, Mr. Williams?”

End of business next Thursday.

Derrick paused.

“Still sounds like bullshit. Are we done here?” He said, then rounded the corner from Main Street to Sycamore. His truck was in view now. He exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding.

There was a chuckle on the other end.

“Very well, I won’t take up any more of your time, Mr. Williams. As promised, I will end the call now. Please do keep me in mind when-”

Click.

Derrick flung the door of the old Dodge Ram open, kicked his boot against the step plate, and climbed in.

Fuckin’ asshole.

He replaced the tasteless wad of tobacco in his lip with a fresh pinch and tossed the refuse into the azalea bushes outside his driver's window. He frowned. His tin was almost empty, and he figured a quick trip to SPEED'N'GO would have to be in the cards on the ride home. Hell, he might even pick up some cookie crumble for Dee.

Dee would like that. He was a good husband to her. Always had been. That wasn't going to change. Not now, not ever.

Still,

Eleve-

No.

Twenty Million Dollars.

6

The popcorn ceiling above Derrick's head danced in unfocused static. His head lay supported well enough on a ragged throw pillow, but his ass sank into the divot that had permanently molded to Dee's body on the far side of the old couch. He propped a holey-socked foot up where his wife's head usually rested. She wouldn't mind. It was far too early for Dee to be up, even on a Thursday. Derrick's shift had started two hours ago.

-Sorry boss, I'm sick as a dog. Can't hardly move out of bed, not going to make it in today
-Well shit, take care of yourself D. We'll get Rusty to cover for you. Think you'll be back tomorrow
-Don't know yet
-OK.

All things considered, this was a rather inconsequential lie to tell his foreman of two and a half years.

Derrick lay still, hands crossed over his chest, eyes fixed on the pimply surface above him. For a moment, he considered just how ugly it looked, and just how *low* the ceiling in the den really was. As a matter of fact, wasn't it too low everywhere in the house? Yes, he thought. Yes, it was.

Static coursed through his brain again and he shut his eyes.

The morning sun had not yet breached the television room in the Williamses' home, nor was the room yet illuminated by the sixty-five-inch television on the far wall, as it would be for the remainder of the day once Dee woke and planted herself where Derrick now lay. The only light that shone in the dark room came from the dim glow of the cell phone resting beside Derrick Williams.

On the screen, it read, bold and true:

Checking Account Balance: $11,800,748.19

Savings Account Balance: $1,919.23

7

"Where you going, hun?" Dee asked.

"Sit by the lake," Derrick said. "Clear my head out some."

Dee nodded. She wanted to ask why on God's green Earth you would want to go sit by a lake with a headache so bad enough that you couldn't even work none, but it would be no use. She already knew what Derrick's response would be, and she didn't want to have that exchange. Not today.

And so, she nodded. It wasn't worth it. She didn't so much as let herself make a face when she noticed that her husband had put on his good shoes — the leather ones she had bought him for his birthday, which he almost never wore. But yes, he had picked his leather shoes today and not the boots which he always wore — the boots he always wore no matter where he was off to, whether it be to work, the store, to walk the town, or to sit by the lake-

The mudroom door slammed shut. Dee shuffled out of the kitchen and plopped down on the couch.

Detecting her presence, the television flared to life.

Randy Travis' voice filled the cab of the screaming old Dodge Ram, but it wasn't the country singer's voice that ran through Derrick's head.

Mr. Williams? Theodore Richards here. I manage wealth for folks like-

Click.

Mr. Williams? Daniel Scott, sorry to bother you at home. If I can just have a-

Slam.

Derrick Williams-

Mr. Williams, I-

Excuse me, Mr. Will-

Slam.

Bang.

THUD

Derrick recoiled his throbbing fist from the dashboard, then turned the radio up louder. The volume made no difference. The old diesel engine of Derrick's Ram screamed, and the wind howled through the open windows, and Randy continued to sing on. None of it was enough.

...Clifford Granger...Granger Financial...I'd like to discuss how you can become more connected *with us...*

...how you can become...

...more...

...Connected.

The promises were bullshit, of course. Derrick wasn't a dumb man, and though the idea of further wealth — *Twenty Million, guaranteed, Mr. Williams* — had gleamed in his mind like shiny jewels tempting him from the far end of the dragon's keep, he had been smart enough to stay put, and thus, out of the snare.

But the conmen had been relentless. The calls, the visits to the house, the letters under his windshield wipers, it had all been too much. He had done remarkably well to keep the secret from Dee so far, but how long would it last?

At this rate, not much longer.

No, the problem wasn't that he would be robbed blind by some slick-haired, suited, smiling slimeball — the initial shock of that had passed, and Derrick had done well to resist their schemes. The problem was that he was easy prey. Each and every man (and one woman, mind you) who had contacted Derrick about an investment, a partnership, a *business opportunity*, had exactly one thing in common: they all had *information* — information on Derrick: his whereabouts, his job, his homelife and where to find him at all

hours, piped directly into their nervous systems through a collective intelligence, a digital neural network, an all-seeing eye.

All of them were chipped. Derrick was not. And as long as this was the case, Derrick stood no chance of ever escaping.

This, he understood.

At last, the truck pulled up to its destination, and Derrick stepped out. A tin of something fell from the back pocket of his khakis and clanked on the pavement as he lowered a loafered foot to the ground.

The tin rolled underneath the truck, and to a place where it would remain long after Derrick had left.

8

The entrance of Universe Biotechnologies was anything but subtle. The bright windows flanking the large revolving front door were plastered with monstrous digital murals depicting happy, well-connected, technologically savvy customers.

On the depiction to the right of the entrance, a young man in a sharp powder-blue sports coat was grinning to an unseen audience while gingerly pressing into a spot just below his ear. On the left, a gorgeous woman in a tight, bright red cocktail dress was chatting with a group of similarly dressed party-goers in a crystal ballroom. Below her ear, and positioned just perfectly at the center of the mural, her long earring glimmered a mote of light exaggerated just enough to suggest the presence of something more behind it.

Above all of this, a large window monitor played a recurring stream of testimonies, interrupted periodically by an animation of a cell-shaded double helix being grasped by a disembodied hand, unraveled like an electrical cord, and coaxed into an outlet indented into the side of a small, lonely Earth. On connection, a flash of light grew and spread across the screen until the entirety of the picture was washed out in all its glow. A single phrase appeared from the void and dominated the screen. It read:

U-Belong

Below the display, and between the murals, the revolving door turned once and swallowed Derrick whole.

The consultation room was stark and modern. Four white walls perfectly boxed in three ferns, two luxurious tan-leather wing-backed chairs, and one large window-screen that replayed the same corporate animation Derrick had seen on the front of the Universe

Biotechnologies building. The ceilings were high. The room felt alien to Derrick in all of its spacious modernity. It smelt of cedar.

The door through which Derrick had come slid open with a quiet hiss. A tall, smiling man returned and comfortably took the seat across from Derrick. He laid a leather-bound folder upon the glass table between them.

“Great news, Mr. Williams,” The man said, his eyes fixed solidly on Derrick’s face from behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. “We’ve reviewed your biometrics, and you have been approved for the implementation procedure. How are we feeling?”

“Fine,” Derrick said. He motioned towards the folder placed before him, waited for the man who had previously introduced himself as Dr. James Conchrow to nod, then plucked it from the table.

“That’s great to hear. Now for the fun part,” James gestured to the table, “In that folder, you’ll see the selection of packages available to you. As I’m sure you know, we offer a wide range of options, each tailored to suit our many different types of customers, based on their exact needs and financial comfortability, of course. Please, take your time to look.”

Derrick opened the folder, feigned a study of its contents, then clapped the folder shut and returned it to the table with a *thwack*.

“I want the diamond package,” he said.

“Excellent decision. The diamond package, as you know, allows access to all of our premier features- environment filtering, U-Telepathy, real-time social screening, neural control for all U-Certified vehicles, and premium social status designation on all U-Verse enabled social media platforms. The nice thing with the diamond package, too, is that you will be the first in line to receive updates to all of the standard features, so your neuro-messaging, optic menu-ing, and real-world indexing will all be a step more up-to-date over someone, with say, a silver package.”

Dr. Conchrow cocked his head.

“It goes without saying, too then, that higher package tiers will have the ability to exclude themselves from contact by lower tier U-Link owners.”

“Great,” Derrick said.

James shifted, then started again.

“Mr. Williams, I took a look at your profile.”

“I bet you did.”

The man pressed something on the side of his neck and leaned in, resting his elbows on his knees. He spoke more quietly now.

“Typically, we don’t advise this to just anyone, but I think you might be eligible for, how should I say-” He tapped the booklet on the table, “-a package that you won’t find in there.” He paused.

“If it’s something you’re interested in, I have a feeling you’ll be well-satisfied with the doors it would open for you.”

“I’ll decide that,” Derrick said.

“Yes, well, you see, people of notable worth- they prefer not to be in *direct connection* with those who might be more limited in selection to our advertised packages. The problem with connecting everyone to everything and to each other all at once is that it creates a sort of equality that some would rather abstain from.”

James paused, then continued.

“To put it quite simply, do you think Tom Cruise or Serena Williams have much interest in being connected to mid-level managers from Danville, Virginia?”

“I reckon they don’t,” Derrick said.

“Exactly. And that’s where our Unclassified Package comes in. The features, to be honest, are not much different from the Diamond Package, but what it does buy you, Mr. Williams, is *exclusivity.* You would be paying to be undoubtedly, verifiably, associated with a higher class of individual, connected only to the highest echelon of global society. Of course, you will always have the freedom to turn on your associations with whomever you would like to mingle with, but you can also turn them *off*, and that’s really the difference here, now isn’t it?”

“Sure.”

“Now, it wasn’t entirely within our procedure, but I already ran an approval on you, Mr. Williams, and I have good news: it’s yours if you want it.”

“How much?”

Dr. James Conchrow smiled, and though he could not place it, Derrick reckoned he had seen that shit-eating grin somewhere before.

9

The date of the procedure came quickly; Derrick had been scheduled for a 10am implant and by 12:30pm he was sutured up, activated, and out the door — not fourteen days since receiving his check from the US Lottery and Games Bureau.

The entire process had been conducted at the Universe Biotechnologies Hub of Southeast Virginia — a process which had been boiled down to a near-perfect systemic procedure after being performed for, quite literally, millions of patients.

In fact, with a fair bit of lobbying and elbow-rubbing, Universe Biotechnologies had even overcome the legal requirements for implantations to be performed by licensed neurosurgeons. A few years back, and with the stipulation that at least one Doctor of Medicine with a residency in Neurosurgery head each facility team, Universe had been able to convince lawmakers to sign a bill allowing surgeries to be conducted, not by classically trained surgeons, but rather by U-Certified U-Link technicians – a certification which required only two years of specialized training at a qualified Universe U-niversity. Scholarships were plenty, of course.

This had cut wait times for U-Link implants down by a factor of four and reduced the costs by nearly half. For Derrick, this meant that he was able to get an appointment only two days after his meeting with Universe Sales Director, Dr. James Conchrow.

Isn't that wonderful?

"Can you tell me your name, sir?"

"Derrick Williams."

"Good."

A machine behind Derrick chirped steadily. In the steel railings of his bed, Derrick could make out the reflections of its red and green lights.

The technician nodded to someone behind Derrick. The tube in his arm moved. A feeling of warmth spread across his body.

“And your address, Mr. Williams?”

“Forty-two East John- uh Forty-two-, Forty-two-, I can’t-“

The technician disappeared behind the edge of his sight. Some unseen thing began to whine and whirl.

That high-pitched whine was the last sound that Derrick Williams remembered from his life before the connection.

The jolt was indescribable.

Once, when Derrick had been a boy, he had discovered a long-forgotten knife in his family’s living room — lodged between the arm of the plaid sofa and the water-ringed side table in his family’s doublewide trailer. The forgotten cheese knife had been sticky, coated in hair, and rather unpleasant, but it had been a knife all the same. For five-year-old Derrick Williams, it had made a rather suitable tool to carry around in the waistband of his dungarees, just like his old man did.

Yes, now he could be just like his old man. A knife was a man’s tool, and this one was his. And what would he use it for first? It would be best to start small. He remembered his father cursing and swearing at something plugged into the outlet beside the sofa. Yes, he could reach that outlet. He would fix that outlet right up. How hard could it be? The knife fit into the slot and-

The jolt that had sent young Derrick halfway across the living room on that distant afternoon paled in comparison to the jolt that woke old Derrick up in the implantation suite of Universe Biotechnologies.

In one brief, electrifying instant, a storm surged across his body and ripped him from his medically induced slumber.

His eyelids burst open, his vision erupted in static, his eyeballs threatened to explode from his skull. Every muscle in his body fired in terrifying unison. His jaw shot open as cables beneath his temples snapped. His teeth were hot in his mouth and his gums became searing layers of electrified foil. A violent current ran in courses through his spine, down the center of his body, and thrust its thousand tendrils through the meat of his every extending appendage. Hot plasma jolted down his thighs, through his knees and elbows, searing the soft bits of his body and cooking him where he lay.

Later, when he would reflect on this moment, he would claim that lightning had shot from his fingertips, and that his body had leapt two feet up and off the bed which he had been strapped down to. Whether or not this had actually occurred, it did not matter because in that instant, all reality changed forever for Derrick Williams.

The pain disappeared just as quickly as it had come. The storm was followed by the stream.

Lights, colors, voices, sounds, letters, numbers, pictures, videos, messages, *information* flooded Derrick's mind as though all that had ever, and would ever, happen on the face of God's green Earth was occurring at once, simultaneously, before his very eyes. His skin prickled. The bed below him, the ceiling above, and the walls around him were gone. There was nothing, and there was everything all at once.

Then, above it all, Derrick felt a warm pressure below his ear, and he was back in the implantation suite. The technician withdrew her hand.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Williams?"

Derrick blinked, raised an arm, observed the back of his hand, then his palm, then dropped it back onto the sheet covering him.

"-East Thomas Court," Derrick said. "Forty-two East Thomas Court, Danville, Virginia… That's my address."

The woman beside him gave a small laugh, then stepped into view.

“You’re a jumper, that’s for sure, but it looks like the procedure was a success. I’ll give you a few moments to collect yourself, and once you’ve woken up, we’ll get you on to orientation. Then you’ll be on your way, okay?”

Derrick sat up.

“I’ll step out now, but please, try to resist turning your U-Link back on until you’ve been transferred to the orientation suite.”

“Yes ma’am,” Derrick said.

The door clicked behind the technician, and then Derrick was alone. He thought he tasted ozone.

10

Derrick Williams descended the front steps of his New York Brownstone for the last time on August 17th, 2042.

On this day, the sky was clear. A bird chirped a cheerful greeting from within the small, sidewalk pear tree in front of his Manhattan home. The leaves on its neatly trimmed branches disappeared, and the creature was highlighted in a green aura. Above, indicator text noted that the bird was a Blue Jay- not terribly common on this side of the city, but not particularly rare either. Estimates suggested that fewer than three thousand of them remained in the vicinity. The text disappeared, and the leaves returned.

Derrick recalled that at one point in his life, he had met a woman who had been fond of Blue Jays. They had met in a park on their second date, and at one point on that particularly beautiful day, just before they had begun their picnic (or was it after?), she had hushed him mid-sentence, pressed a painted nail over his lips, and told him to listen to the music coming from the cover above their heads. He had stopped his ramble and listened.

He found that there wasn't anything particularly spectacular about the chirping he had heard. It had been pleasant, sure, but they had just been birds, nothing more. All the same, he had entertained her, and it had been pleasant enough. Pleasant enough was a good way to describe the next twenty-six years they had spent together.

Derrick wondered how Dee was doing these days. The woman he had met in the park was not the woman he had divorced three years ago, but then again, he was not the man she had met twenty-six years ago either. He plucked a piece of lint from his navy sport coat and flicked it to the wind. If there was any more to that thought, it was cut short by the sound of another woman's voice in his head:

“Good morning, Mr. Williams. Traffic data indicates that your U-Ride will not arrive at your location in time for a 9am drop-off on East 46th Street. Would you like me to find you an alternative means of transport?”

Derrick declined.

Approximately four blocks down the street, a waypoint pinged approaching Bus S019 amongst the traffic, turning onto his street. Now there was a thought: public transport. He would give it a go, if for nothing else, then to experience a little change of pace, to ride with the working folk. For old times’ sake, of course.

He walked to the bus stop with just enough time to spare to wait and mull through the neural messages he had received from his colleagues over the last twelve hours: The Jameson account needed to be reviewed first thing in the morning. Alex Gary will be on vacation next week, and someone will need to cover for him at the Leadership meeting on Wednesday. Don’t forget the Procurement team potluck is on Thursday.

The message cloud disappeared, and the bus station returned with the hiss of Bus S019’s arrival. Its bifold door opened before Derrick. A waft of warm air struck his face. He elected to override the scent from within in favor of a light French vanilla.

The bus was mostly full, though only a select few of its riders – three men in suits and one particularly attractive young woman — were visible to Derrick. The remaining passengers had been replaced by faint red outlines, lightly filled and shaded to indicate that, yes, a human being occupied that space, but of course, his or her appearance could safely be disregarded. Derrick chose an empty seat two-thirds of the way down the bus aisle, next to the window, and behind the young woman.

Her name was Samantha Tyler, age thirty-two, accountant at Hemmerson Incorporated, married to David Tyler, and mother of two toddlers. To pass the time, she was experiencing an info-doc on the remaining panda bears in the Southeastern Sichuan Province. Derrick lost interest.

The bus lurched onward.

These days, it was quite rare for Derrick — or most anyone who was *connected,* for that matter — to disable their U-Link. This was by no means due to lack of choice, but rather because the sheer number of conveniences offered by the connection simply outweighed any negatives to the visual overlays and constant attention shifts that came with its neural stream of information.

But on that day, for one reason or another, which neither I, nor Derrick Williams could ever quite explain, at about halfway through his journey to work, Derrick decided to reach up and press into that old familiar spot on his neck to silence his U-Link — just for a minute or two.

Then, as Derrick knew it, the bus, with its polished floor, immaculate upholstery, and stainless surfaces, disintegrated in a *whoosh*.

Now unfiltered and unprocessed, raw and rough, bold and true, the reality of the interior of the New York City public bus came into focus. Grime and graffiti plastered the paint-chipped interior. The seats, which had been a soft, spotless white, decayed into their true, lumpy navy forms, speckled with untold substances and worn through in their seats.

Litter — an empty beer bottle, discarded gum clots, suspicious brown smears — materialized around Derrick's custom Oxfords. Scents of French vanilla dissipated only to be rapidly replaced by the stench of body odor, old vomit, and stale cigarettes. And with the arrival of all of the filth of bus S019, the faces and bodies of its passengers came forth too.

Red outlines retreated; characters returned. One row ahead, an old man with a swollen nodule on his neck picked at a purple scab on his elbow, then scratched at something beneath his basketball shorts. A row further, a woman in a stained sweatshirt drooled on her heavy chest in an unnaturally heavy doze. Beside her, a bulging-eyed individual gummed messily at a melted chocolate bar. The bar broke. A piece landed in his lap and he screamed.

The other riders, whether through means of artificial or natural avoidance, pretended not to notice any of this; they only dully stared at their feet or at the world rolling by beyond the bus windows.

But here, beyond the smudgy glass panes, the city streets were no longer as bright as Derrick had thought. In fact, the sky was not clear at all, but rather hung in a low, foggy grey which wrapped itself around the city and clung heavily to the towering buildings it enveloped. On the sidewalks, the passing trash bins which had seemed so neat and orderly just moments ago were now overflowing with litter, some with piles of refuse stacked high against them with no hope of being collected any time soon.

Occasionally, a man or woman could be seen picking through these heaps. Further on ahead, Derrick noted a tarp strung across two of these piles in an alleyway between two old buildings. A pair of purple feet protruded from beneath it.

As Bus S019 continued onwards towards its final destination at the crossing between Park Ave and East 50th Street — the intersection where a particular Russo Family Cement truck was also heading — Derrick took in all that had been revealed, and all that surrounded him. His stomach turned. Something hot rose in his throat.

Were these not his people? No, certainly not. Derrick was from a small town, a nice town, not the city. His father had been a working man and so had he. He was different from what he saw before him now. Wasn't he?

Or did you run away from it all, all the same?

He raised his hand to his neck, met his pointer and middle finger to the skin below his ear, and had almost pushed into the soft flesh when something at the front of the bus stopped him still.

Amidst all of its unpleasantness, at the front of Bus S019, in a three-wide seat, movement caught Derrick's eye.

Two dark-skinned boys, neither of whom could have possibly been any older than twelve or thirteen, hollered, jostled a single item between themselves, then gawked at each other in wide-eyed gazes. Their eyes dropped down to the thing between them. One of them lifted it, and Derrick could see now: it was a comic book.

Together, they turned a page. One of the boys shrieked in pleasant surprise, then the other boy narrowed his gaze downward, looked up at his friend, and cheered. They smiled, laughed, then turned yet another page together. Derrick dropped his hand from his neck.

In their laughter, something had moved in Derrick's mind — not from an overlay, an info stream, or from any neural messaging — but from something vivid all the same.

The thing that moved was something he had experienced once, a memory, long before he had received his U-Link, long before he had won a twenty-five million dollar scratch off in SPEED'N'GO, long before he had taken a job with Skinner Construction, and even long before he had ever met Dee Muscher from Southern Haywood, North Carolina.

Once upon a time, he had also had a friend with whom he had shared a story, one not unlike the one the two boys at the front of the bus had. Derrick hadn't been allowed to own any comic books — his father had said they were for wussies — but Adam Wilson from down the street had been. Derrick had gone to Adam's, and together the two of them had spent countless summer afternoons mulling through the brightly colored pages of a comic about a red-caped vigilante. *Daredevil*. It was Adam's only comic, but he had loved that book, had read it twenty times over, and had shared it with his neighbor-friend when he was only nine years old.

They, too, had turned the pages together. They, too, had laughed. The story had always been the same, but it had always been exciting, and they had shared that excitement together. In those moments, from that time long ago, he had found connection.

Derrick watched the boys, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, something welled up just behind his eyes. The boys laughed and bounced up and down in the front row seats of the city bus as it sped recklessly onwards through the busy streets of New York City.

There was something beautiful in what Derrick saw on Bus S019 — something both beautiful and sad. It was beautiful and sad, and it was wonderful too.

From the thing which welled up behind Derrick's eyes, a warmth spread through his cheeks, down his chest, down his arms and legs, and into his feet and hands. His fingertips

buzzed, and for the briefest of moments, he considered the urge to reach up to his neck once more.

This time, he would dig his fingernails deep into the skin of his neck, tear through the flesh, worm his fingers down into the warm goop below, and grasp the wire which ran from below his ear and up into his skull. He would grab it and then, with all of his strength, he would rip the U-Link from his head — sever the device from his mind, disconnect, and maybe even forget.

Maybe, just maybe, then he could go back home to Danville, Virginia. Maybe there he could find connection — real connection. Maybe he could find Adam Wilson again and tell him about the kids on the bus and their comic. Maybe he could find Dee and tell her about the Blue Jay he had seen in the tree in front of his new home and how it had made him think of that time they had spent in the park together so long ago. Maybe they could connect again. Maybe she would take him back. Maybe, just maybe.

These were Derrick Williams's final thoughts as the Russo Family Cement truck made its connection with the side of New York City Bus S019 at the intersection between Park Avenue and East 50th Street.